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An Aestheticising of Irish Peasantry

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Hana Khasawneh

An aestheticising of Irish Peasantry.

It is the main claim of this article that the vitality of peasant culture with its vivid, even violent antagonism toward modernity is a rich source of inspiration to W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde and many other Revivalist authors. We find in the peasantry literary tradition a mode of writing that allows the oppressed to be represented and embraced by literature in a direct fashion. The Revivalists concerned themselves with distinguishing Irish literature from its English counterpart by focusing on Celtic mythology, folklore and the national peasant culture, a frail one under the constant threat of traditional forms and prose narratives attempting to supersede the Irish identity. The presence of the Irish peasants is an aesthetic style for coping with the conditions of a complex world by constituting an aesthetic realm and making a different kind of art. The Revivalists, caught in the uncertainties and anxieties of the political and cultural dilemmas of the twentieth century, turned towards peasants as an alternative vehicle for meaning. This article observes that though invented and uneasily placed within the narrative framework, Irish peasantry offers an aesthetic basis to all other stories and voices that are never told and heard. Irish peasants introduce a new generation of nationalists and writers to the myths and legends of early Irish history. What will be claimed here is that the disruptive presence of the Irish peasants is indicating a society in flux and transition, charting, as they do, the emergence of that society between the two competing powers of Ireland: the imperial power of Britain and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Many Revivalists turned to the present and focused their attention on contemporary culture, and their use of peasant narratives allowed them to avoid the destructive impetus of modernist art, while forging a literary tradition that was able to mock the upper classes and to give hope to the rural victims. Ultimately, the adherence to peasant traditions, beliefs, customs and history becomes a means of expressing the artistic as well as the political autonomy of that class, in a complex and interesting parallelism between the winds of change sweeping both the artistic and the political life of the nation in those years.

Irish peasantry has been ignored by theatre historians and critics. The Irish peasant was violently dispatched on the stage of the Abbey and lamented in Yeats's *The Fisherman* (1914). English commentators had a clear sense that Ireland was less civilized than Britain and that the barbarous Irish peasantry had more in common with American Indians or other savages than with the English. It is the main purpose of this article to illuminate the aestheticising of Irish peasantry and of their folk tales as significant means of establishing a legitimate Irish voice. Most Irish writers had a common belief in a single entity called 'the peasants' in an attempt to universalize or even to naturalize their ideas about Irish life. This unified category of the peasants is simplified by falling under the category of 'the folk.' To the English public, the peasant represented the savagery and barbarism of the Irish rural life. Emily Lawless observes that "All peasants are difficult and elusive creatures to portray but perhaps an Irish peasant ... is the most difficult upon the face of the earth. Anyone who has ever tried to flying a net over him knows perfectly well in his or her own secret soul that the attempt has been a failure – at best that entire realms and regimens of the subject have escaped observation" (Lawless 1887, 98). George Watson states that middle class Catholics "did not like being reminded that Ireland was an overwhelmingly rural and peasant society" (Watson 1979, 25). Middle-class Catholics formed a ready audience for the Irish theatre movement because the idealization of the peasant instilled in them a sense of pride in a native culture that fits their social, national and economic aspirations. The National Theatre that was riddled with *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1902) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) centered on the dramatization of the Irish peasant, breaking the previous staging of traditional Irish life. The Abbey Theatre playwrights in their pamphlet *Irish Plays* assert that "This life is rich in dramatic materials, while the Irish peasantry of the hills and coast speak an exuberant language and have a primitive grace and wildness due to the wild country they live in which gives their most ordinary life vividness and colour unknown in more civilized places" (qtd. in Clarke 1982, 121). Consequently, the recurrent objection to these plays was that they were not Irish as they misrepresent the Irish peasantry. For Joyce,

the Irish peasant as constructed by literary Revivalists and cultural nationalists was a static, mysterious and threatening character. Even the most appealing of his peasants, the peasant woman who invites Davin to spend the night in her cabin in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1965) and becomes in Stephen's imagination "a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness" and gradually an image of his own soul, is nonetheless "a frustratingly distant and almost unfathomable figure" (Joyce 1965, 183, 221). The strategy of dismantling most important deprecations of Irishness and returning to more authentic linguistic, musical and narrative sources produced a critique of colonialism and a thirst for cultural and political nationalism. Yeats exalted the power of nationalism: "there is no feeling, except religious feeling, which moves masses of men so powerfully as national feeling and upon this, more widely spread among all classes in Ireland today than at any time this century, we build our principal hopes" (Yeats 1961 98). Ireland was then engaged in the business of re-envisioning and reimagining its history. Depicting those political and cultural activities was the function of the Irish modernist drama. Because theatre was such a popular medium in Ireland, history remained a major preoccupation for its audience. Yeats was influenced by Fenian John O'Leary and Standish James O'Grady as they directed him to native Irish literature and traditions as suitable sources for literary inspiration leading to his conclusion that the race was more important than the individual.

The complex cultural significance of the oppressed category of the peasant resides in what they signify as a concept through their language. This marginal construct breaks social, political and cultural norms: peasantry is presented in a complex way, as a suspicious and narrow-minded group that reveals a remarkable sensitivity to narrative extravagance. Peasants are not idealized figures, but people in whom a passion for life is unquenchable. Synge elevated the peasant into a new cultural hero. In *Pegeen*, readers find the paradox that Synge associates with peasants: namely, that they often realize and desire more than they accept in their lives. *The Playboy of the Western World* transcends the prosaic stereotype of the Irish peasant society. It is a text that pivots realism, modernist verisimilitude, comedy, poetic discourse and action and examines the dialectical

relationship between such oppositions. For Synge, "there are many sides to the play" (qtd. in Holder 1988, 527). It is this complexity that incites the rioting of the Abbey Theatre in 1907, as well as Synge's demystifying of romantic Irish peasantry. Declan Kiberd notes that Irish peasants were not violent people who sprang at the actors: at the crux of the audience's fury is the disjunction between Synge's savage representation of Irish peasantry and the audience's expectation of an ethnographic discourse that would be an endorsement of the Gaelic nationalist rhetoric. Synge's audience is prompted into querying their constructions of Irish peasantry. While Christy confesses to killing his father, this transgressive deed is transformed from a grand story to a gallant action where Pegeen declares Christy is fit to hold his head high. This is a milieu where concepts of justice and morality are deconstructed. By presenting the audience with references to violent disputes and social wars, Synge's social structure demonstrates how savagery is interlocked into the peasantry social structure thus granting an authenticity to the imagery that is causing abhorrence within the text of the play. Yeats urged Synge to stop trying to be a French symbolist writer and to return to Ireland to study peasant life as a repository of subjects, themes and language. There is no question that Synge did to the glory of the Irish peasants and idealized these figures depicting them as mystical and wise people, though he also revealed the hard and brutal dimensions of their existence.

The pitiful educational and economic state that Irish peasants were in, if nothing else, favoured the preservation of a popular tradition that had always been rich and complex. To speak or to write about that figure is to write about something far beyond the local reality of country life. Seamus Deane points out how *In the Shadow of the Glen* fails to foreground the grim reality of the Irish peasantry since: "The poverty and the limited incestuous nature of the society is hinted at on several occasions. Yet famine, eviction, military oppression and landlordism, the characteristic facts of late-nineteenth-century Irish rural existence for the peasantry are almost entirely repressed features of the text" (Deane 1985, 59). The Irish peasantry that is transmitted in plays, poems and stories leads to the birth of the idea of an Ireland free from the British authority. Thus, the stories were

not the fantasies of a picturesque peasantry but rather a reflection of the essence of a group that began to rise culturally and politically after centuries of colonization. The peasant stands not only for Ireland's victimization, ignorance, vulgarity and poverty but also for its nobility and solemnity. No dramatization or portrayal of the Irish peasant was free of the shadow and the presence of the English colonizer. There is a close link between Irish peasantry and nationalism. Cultural alienation can be best summed up in Stephen Dedalus's discussion with the English dean of studies in *A Portrait of the Artist*: "The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language" (Joyce 1965, 189). Thus, peasant folklore and traditions are crucial to the cultural discourse of the Revival and to the development of modern Irish drama. Irish authors prefer revolutionary literature over political violence. To turn the peasant into a figure of writing is to participate in an Irish cultural discourse and to place one's work inside the national and cultural discourse. Therefore, to define the idea of the Irish peasant is to define Ireland itself. In *A General Introduction for My Work* (1937), Yeats explains his reason for the use of folklore, asserting that folklore is far from sustaining a monological perspective on identity as it achieves the opposite effect pointing towards the universal origin of all cultures: "we Irish poets, modern men also, reject every folk art that does not go back to Olympus. Give me time and a little youth and I will prove that even 'Johnny, I hardly knew ye' goes back" (Yeats 1961, 516). His constant references to countrymen and country women gesture toward rural Irish people and forge a linguistic link between rural and national identity: an assertion of essential Irishness that surely did not escape Yeats and many other Irish writers. The peasant stands as a national archetype and thus Ireland becomes purely a peasant nation. Yeats presents "a distinctive culture of folktales, dances, sports, costumes, all seamlessly bound by the Irish language" (qtd. in Kiberd 1995, 138). With the constant political upheavals in Ireland, Irish literature is mainly about nationality that is celebrated in prose and verse. According to Yeats, Ireland

is "coming into her own and better self, ... she is turning to the great men of her past - to Emmet and Wolfe Tone, to Grattan and to Burke, to Davis and Mitchel" (qtd. in Ellmann 1979, 112). Yeats felt the need to present a dignified image of the peasant who symbolizes true Ireland. This attempt led him to dissociate the ideal peasant from the stereotypical negative image of the ignorant peasant and to acknowledge the dream of the Irish peasant that has never been interweaved with reality. In Roy Foster's view, "Yeats remade an Irish identity in his work and life. In the process he reclaimed Ireland for himself, his family and his tradition. He began by asserting a claim on the land, particularly the land of Sligo, through its people: the discovery of folklore and fairy belief" (Foster 1999, 130). Yeats's construction of the actual figure of the Irish peasant is most memorably embodied in the well-know poem, *The Fisherman*. Yeats revisits one more time the ghostly, contemplative figure of the Irish peasant:

... Maybe a twelvemonth since
 Suddenly I began,
 In scorn of this audience,
 Imagining a man,
 And his sun-freckled face,
 And grey Connermara cloth,
 Climbing up to a place
 Where stone is dark under froth,
 And the down-turn of his wrist
 When the flies drop in the stream;
 A man who does not exist,
 A man who is but a dream;
 And cried, 'Before I am old'
 I shall have written him one
 Poem maybe as cold
 And passionate as the dawn. (Yeats 1991 97).

The ambivalent nature of this figure could hardly be more starkly or more beautifully stated in traditional literature. The Fisherman is the acknowledged figment of the poetic imagination, a figure of desire, an embodiment of wisdom and calm, and of land itself, blending into his landscape. The Fisherman is both an idealized Irish peasant and the subject of Yeats's art and his ideal, one person audience, a silent and receptive figure waiting patiently to receive the tribute of Yeats's poem.

As for the representation the peasant, the task of the Irish literary Revival was to dismantle the Paddy image and to turn the peasant into a spiritual figure who would embody the Celtic imagination. Lady Gregory observes that "Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment as it has been represented but the home of an ancient idealism ... the Irish people ... are weary of misrepresentation" (Gregory 1901, 67). It is in this endeavor to define the Irish peasant as the essence of an ancient and dignified Irish culture that the Revivalists were countering English stereotypes. The imaginative wealth of the Irish peasants is posed against the modern and industrial British spirit. Yeats and Hyde viewed folklore as a central point against the venal bourgeois economy that is associated with the English cities. In Ireland, the dream of creating an ancient, national and unchanging Irish peasant culture was walking arm in arm with creating a contemporary Anglo-Irish literature that was different from the Victorian English literature. For Yeats, "the dream of the Irish peasant has never been entangled by reality" (Yeats 1899, 94), and Anglo-Irish literature, in styling itself in "a tradition of life that existed before commercialism and the vulgarity founded upon it ... was opposing the late Victorian and early modern English literature" (Yeats 1899, 95). Modernist English literature was taking pride from glorifying England and its empire. Yeats was determined to present folklore stories as an ancient system of belief, and announced his plan of devising "a new method and a new culture" (Yeats, 1965, 102). Revivalist writers stressed the dichotomy between rural and urban life, associating cities (such as London) with culture and commerce, and the countryside (especially the rural areas in the West of Ireland) with nature. Seamus Deane notes how Celtic values were put in stark contrast against the vices of the British bourgeoisie, and that vital peasants were ultimately preferred to anemic city dwellers. This valorization of the peasant brings to mind Daniel Corkery's *The Hidden Ireland* (1924), a book where Irishness is largely equated with peasantry: for Corkery, Irishness was "a narrow, insular concept best found beyond the walls of both cities and towns" (Corkery 1989, 23), concluding that Ireland should become a purely peasant nation. The touchstone of Irish identity that is to be found in this

confluence of Gael and peasant, which he significantly termed 'Irish-Ireland', was the cabin : "But of Irish-Ireland it is, perhaps, better to realize the cabin as a thing in itself, than any hamlet, however small; for being then a peasant nation, the cabins, as might have been expected, were the custodians of its mind" (Corkery 1989, 26). Similarly, Synge felt that "this little corner on the face of the world and the people who live in it have a peace and a dignity from which we are shut for ever" (Synge 1982, 162). Moreover, by referring to a pastoral vision of a pre-industrial, rural life, Irish nationalists could imagine the Irish peasants like an authentic and original, natural and romantic group, representing Irish values as opposed to English concepts and culture. Country life is characterized by orality and closeness to nature. The Irish passion for oral literature including songs, music and folktales is extraordinary. The simple peasants, fishermen and vagabonds cultivate and enjoy the art of narration, singing and reading stories. An intricate part of their own national identity, oral tradition becomes a national storehouse for folk customs and ideas, embracing high literature as well as the common lore of the peasant masses. As Penny Fielding writes, "The oral is never simply one thing and what orality signifies in nineteenth-century writing cannot be understood without considering its uses as an agent in the creation and re-creation of cultural norms and values. The oral is always the other: of writing (speech), of culture (the voice of nature), of the modern (a pre-modern past)" (Fielding 1996, 4). In *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825), Thomas Croker reveals the dazzling treasure of the Irish tradition. He celebrates the stories and legends of the oppressed Irish peasants and their pagan freedom from the constraints of Christianity and morality. This idea goes back to the nineteenth-century Irish Revivalists' argument that individual artists should substantiate their work in the communal stories and mythologies of the illiterate folk. In his preface to *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge affirms that "In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the star has been turned to bricks" (Synge 1982, 53). This collectivity is fulfilled by turning to the popular traditions of people who live in their

bodies and whose folklore constitutes endless images without ideas. The association of the country with a spiritualized physicality underlines the Revivalist idea that “all art should be a Centaur finding in the popular lore its back and its strong legs” (Yeats 1965, 229). Yeats formulated this notion to Joyce as follows: “When the idea which comes from individual life marries the image that is born from the people one gets great art, the art of Homer and of Shakespeare and of Chartres Cathedral” (qtd. in Ellmann 1954, 89). What is implicit in this Yeatsian quotation is the belief that the Irish popular tradition disrupts literary conventions. It needs only the magical touch of the artist. The effort to compromise these opposing features is an attempt to create and to define an Irish culture distinct from its English predominant counterpart. Peasants represent a pure state of national culture that is close to romantic fiction. In “What Irishmen Should Know” and “How Irishmen Should Feel” (1886), John O’Leary argues that there is a link between folk forms and nationality, and in particular he claims that literature and nationality were inseparable. It is no wonder that O’Leary was directing young Irish writers towards the untapped reservoir of the Irish folklore and its manipulation of literary rules. The folklore of the Irish countrysides and ancient Gaelic literature served as dual sources for a new Irish literature, as two realms that Yeats brought together. In Seamus Deane’s analysis, “Yeats had no idea or attitude which was not part of the late-Romantic stock in trade. He was different in the fervour of his convictions, not in their form” (Deane 1985, 40). Yeats began fieldwork among the peasants of the West of Ireland, accompanying Lady Gregory on excursions to record folklore, songs and accounts of Irish culture. The peasant stands for a deep cultural and pastoral milieu that is attempting to affirm its own existence after centuries of colonization and oppression. O’Leary praised the Irish poet Samuel Ferguson for the barbarous truth of his writings – a savage primitivism countering the verbal felicity of contemporary English poets like Edmund Dobson and Arthur Lang.

The idea that Irish poetry should capture a savage and primary truth was a major inspiration for the Revivalists. The English stereotype of the Irish peasantry as ignorant and savage is replaced with a more dignifying and appealing image. In this alternative image, peasantry is the source of wisdom and value. In their search for nationality, either

literary or cultural, Irish writers turned to those they imagined to be most distinctively and authentically Irish: the peasants. This phenomenon justifies the disruptive representation of the Irish peasant in late-nineteenth- and in early-twentieth-century literature. Lady Gregory's great contribution to the field of folklore emerges with the publication of her book *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920), a testimony in which she recounts her personal encounters with supernatural things and with the expressions of Irish folklore in people's traditions and mentality. It is necessary to stress that from Hyde on that enterprise for the collection and publication of folklore acquires significant ideological and aesthetic connotations of supreme transcendency: Yeats, Lady Gregory, Hyde and other authors relied heavily on the inexhaustible source of folklore because they were conscious that old stories transmitted from generation to generation by the culturally and politically oppressed peasantry constitute an essential element of Irish identity. The Revivalists were largely responsible for this vision of rural Ireland and for the ascendance of the peasant as a figure of quintessential Irishness. Yeats and Hyde established a new theory of the peasant which distanced peasant narrators from their stereotypical ignorance in an attempt to secure literary, as well as aristocratic origins for their folktales. As a result, despite their Ascendancy upbringing, both authors were viewed as the legitimate inheritors of folklore narratives. Rather than charged narratives promoting a violent change, folktales were presented as 'dreams' with no moral and as source-books for creative literary figures, and therefore accused of escapism and of an aloof lack of concern for the material conditions of the agrarian working class. Eventually, folktales become essentially a classless genre. In Yeats's words,

One of those old rambling moralless tales which are the delight of the poor and hard-driven wherever life is left in its natural simplicity. They tell of a time when nothing had consequences, when even if you were killed, if only you had a good heart, somebody would bring you to life again with a touch of a rod and when if you were a prince and happened to look exactly like your brother, you might go to bed with his queen and have only a little quarrel afterwards. We too, if we were weak and poor that everything threatened us with misfortune might remember every old dream that has been strong enough to fling the weight of the world from its shoulders. (Yeats 1961 141)

The aestheticizing of the Irish country people is apparent in Synge's wandering tramps and Joyce's hardened peasants. Both writers created an imaginary peasant opposing the idealized peasant of middle-class, Catholic Dublin, as well as the peasant figure portrayed by previous writers. The imagined portrait of the Irish peasant was a way of asserting a presence and giving special authority to one's view of country people and eventually turning a marginal literary activity into the centre of Irish culture. Synge's entire work is heavily indebted to peasant culture: "the intellectual movement that has taken place in Ireland for the last twenty years has been chiefly a movement towards a nearer appreciation of the country people and their language" (Synge 1982, 367). His journey to the Aran Islands represents a quest for a natural community to replace an absent centre. Like Yeats, Synge also advocates a romantic primitivism, but his stories of wildness, verbal extravagance and violence revise the way in which the peasant had been spiritualized. Synge's plays assert that language, the medium that expresses and surrounds all the characters, is perhaps their most valuable resource, without which life would be unendurable. Closely aligned with his experiments in language is his consistent concern with the peasant class of Ireland. In the peasant Synge saw what he regarded as the true Ireland, a breed of people who has avoided the snares of modernization and its restricting values. He thus revised the Yeatsian spiritualization of the peasant and undermined the urban middle class portrait of noble farmers.

The nationalist idealization of peasantry had political as well as cultural implications. There is a gap between the idealized peasants and the real rural people, which illuminates the peculiar language that informed both Irish culture and Irish literature. The discourse surrounding Irish people is crucial when we remember the fact that the stereotype featured in English comic literature is of 'Paddy,' a comic and drunken Irish peasant who embodies the hierarchical relationship of Ireland and Britain. The largest number of vicious, racialized cartoons and print descriptions of the Irish appeared when Ireland seemed most violent and disorderly to British observers. The dehumanization of the Irish

people in English literature is challenged by an alternative tradition of portraying the Irish peasant as a noble, honest and victimized farmer. L. Perry Curtis states that "the gradual but unmistakable transformation of Paddy, the stereotypical Irish Celt of the mid-nineteenth century from a drunken and relatively harmless peasant into a dangerous ape-man or simianized agitator reflected a significant shift in the attitudes of some Victorians about the differences between not only Englishmen and Irishmen, but also between human beings and apes" (Curtis 1968, 98). Peasants embody Irish culture through their folk songs and folk lifestyles. Yeats and Hyde created a portrait of the peasant that overturned the prevailing English colonial stereotype performed on the Irish stage. Both Yeats and Hyde established a new theory of folklore which offered a noble representation of peasant narrators and secured literary status and attention to their tales. The tales of the Irish peasantry thus become a significant means of establishing the Irish voice. In *The Celtic Twilight* (1902), Yeats announces: "I have ... written down accurately and candidly much that I have heard and seen and except by way of commentary, nothing that I have merely imagined. I have, however, been at no pains to separate my own beliefs from those of the peasantry, but have rather let my men and women, dhoul and faeries go their way unoffended or defended by any argument of mine" (Yeats 1961, 31). Yeats presents fairy belief as a fundamental aspect of the Irish peasantry and he appears to accept peasantry stories as accurate. The stories collected in *The Celtic Twilight* are difficult to identify as Yeats's own or as the accounts of Irish peasants that he faithfully collected. Yeats intentionally blurred the line between his narrative persona and the voices of the peasants to form a truth-telling narrative technique intended to present readers with some truth that they evaluate on its own merit, while enhancing the author's power, since his narrative voice encompasses all the other speaking voices.

Very often, these rural figures assert a special empiricism that requires an elaborate cultural discourse. Hyde's collection of *Besides the Fire: a Collection of Irish Gaelic Folk Stories* (1890) "became the source of what has come to be regarded as the most notable and distinctive characteristic of modern Irish drama - the quality of the writing which gave dialect and English as it is spoken in Ireland a new status in world drama" (ÓhAodha 1969,

VII). Hyde crossed the boundaries of language, religion and social class to personify the medium through which the Irish peasant could speak to a larger audience; therefore, he claims, he has recorded the stories just as he heard them from the original tellers. Hyde innovatively included the name of each teller from whom he collected the stories. Yeats praised Hyde, noting that “Hyde is now preparing a volume of folk tales in Gaelic, having taken them down for the most part word for word among the Gaelic speakers of Roscommon and Galway. He is perhaps most to be trusted of all. He knows the people thoroughly. Others see a phrase of Irish life; he understands all its elements. His work is neither humorous nor mournful; it is simply life” (Yeats 1888, xvi). Yeats saw Hyde’s work as reflecting the life of the Irish peasants accurately, without any of the humorous or mournful features stereotypically associated with it. Yeats similarly attempted the adoption of a peasant voice in *The Stories of Red Hanrahan* (1905) through the persona of Red Hanrahan, a peasant who becomes a poet by entering the spirit world via an encounter with a fairy queen. The figure of Hanrahan had developed out of Yeats’s contemplation of Gaelic poets and especially Anthony Raftery. In a letter to Katherine Tynan, Yeats explains that his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* “was meant for Irish poets. They should draw on it for plots and atmosphere. You will find plenty of workable subjects” (qtd. in O’Shea 1974, 231). Although this work portrays ‘the Celt’ as more noble than savage, it was not until the publication of Hyde’s *Love Songs of the Connacht* (1904) that Irish folklore made its most important contribution to Irish literature, cultural nationalism and political objective. This is where Yeats experimented with several dramatic styles, including peasant realism, farce and modern naturalism, and eventually produced a sophisticated drama that combined poetry, dance, mask and symbolic action to represent a world of ideas and pure passion.

Edward Hirsch shows that a complete absorption into peasantry identity would undermine the role of author, in the case of Yeats, or of scholar and public intellectual, in the case of Hyde. Although both authors confess an alliance to the peasant culture, in fact, they also signify their own separation from that culture. In the late nineteenth century, folk culture erased individuality and individual merits. Yeats’s subtle self-positioning in his

poem 'The Stolen Child' in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* is noteworthy: the presence of the poem in a collection of peasant origins establishes the poem and its author as traditional, rural and representative; at the same time, the formal difference between Yeats's verse and the traditional prose narratives is striking. More interestingly, Yeats offers an alternative view of fairy captivity, usually characterized as undesirable and as a prison from which the peasant needs to be rescued. Yeats imagines a contrasting picture of a fairy land that is an escape from the cruelties of this world:

Come away, O, human child!
To the woods and waters wild,
With a fairy hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than
You can understand. (Yeats 1991 65).

While original Irish folktales follow the mortals' escape from fairy enchantment, Yeats's story reflects his personal interest in encountering and entering the fairy realm via folklore or the occult. It is precisely in these opposing conceptions that the difference between folklore and art resides. *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* best represents the version of Irish life untouched by contemporary political realities created by Yeats, who stresses the occult spirituality of the Irish peasantry in a wide variety of songs, plays, ballads and folktale stories. There are some poems such as 'The Mediation of the Old Fisherman' in which Yeats asserts the vigor of the Irish peasantry, discovering in folklore a way to locate his work in a historically real community. Irish peasantry is a rich repository of heroic, romantic and folk legends that bear witnesses to a sophisticated and indigenous Celtic civilization. The theme of 'the aristocratic peasant' recurs several times throughout Yeats's writings: he depicts Irish folklore as possessing a kind of genealogy as the aristocratic families of Europe, as well as the same amount of dignified subject:

There is no song or story handed down among the cottages that has not words and thoughts to carry one as far, for though one can know but a little of their ascent, one knows that they ascend like medieval genealogies through unbroken dignities to the beginning of the world. Folk art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and pretty, as

certainly as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered into itself the simplest and most unforgettable thoughts of generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted. (Bramsbäck 1971 60)

Elsewhere, Yeats equates folklore with the best literary genres; Hyde similarly emphasizes the nobility of Irish folklore claiming that Irish oral literature praised what is "courteous, high-minded and noble", thus linking Irish narratives to the court and nobility and restoring folklore to the aristocratic and educated audience it deserves, since folktales contain "the best and truest thoughts not of the rude forefathers of the hamlet but of the kings, sages, bards and shanachies of bygone ages" (Hyde 1889, 215).

To conclude, in modern Irish literature there is an increasing interest in the rural customs, myths and stories of the Irish country people, whose life tends to be situated at the centre of the attempt to regenerate and to transform Ireland. The culture of the emerging Irish state is seen as a peasant one firmly located in rural traditions and folklore, which become both the source and the subject of the cultural production of the founders of the national theatre. Many Irish authors, including Yeats, Synge and Hyde, reformulated and reconceptualized Irish peasant life and ultimately the essential image of the Irish and their culture. This accomplishment is not unremarkable, given the negative images often associated with the Irish abroad. Thanks to Yeats and Hyde the Irish folktale became a respectable literary genre worthy of investigation and collection.

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